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ABSTRACT

What the instructor of freshman composition might reasonably hope for at the end of the semester is that his or her students have advanced sufficiently in their self-critical attitudes so as to approach future writing challenges with some sense of hope. To borrow Russell A. Hunt's metaphor, freshmen might at least learn to strive toward opening the "door of understanding" even if the instructor will not witness their flinging the door wide open and walking through. What is expected of freshmen after a semester of work is often simplistic; hard results are difficult to come by. A professor who asks his students to evaluate their own skills as writers at several points during the semester finds that their last set of evaluations yield what some might consider "disappointing" results. But if instructors should strive to instill confidence in their students, they must also recognize that for a student to recognize his or her own weaknesses is also part of the process of becoming a writer. (TB)

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WHAT CAN WE REASONABLY EXPECT AT THE END OF FRESHMAN COMPOSITION?

John Sandman

I often argue with colleagues that my Freshman Composition course cannot serve as an innoculation from errors in writing . In theory, I know that what Mike Rose calls the medical model of teaching writing is ridiculous, but, in practice, it is hard not to desire and even expect a cure for my students' writing problems.

Two years ago, I began having my students do the following self-evaluation exercise at the end of the semester:

Evaluate your writing in the course this semester, making sure to cover the following areas. Before you start writing, look back at the writing autobiography your wrote in the beginning of the semester to get some perspective.

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1. Choose the worst piece of writing you've done in this course. What standards did you use to choose it as worst? Describe why and how this was your worst piece of writing. Consider both the process (how you wrote it) and the product (what you ended up with).

2. Choose the best piece of writing you have done in this course. Again, describe the standards you used to make your choice. Describe why and how this was your best piece of writing. Consider both process and product.

3. What are your strengths and weaknesses as a writer? Are your strengths and weaknesses different from what you thought they were in the beginning of the course?

As is evident from the instructions, this exercise is parallel to one at the beginning of the course in which students describe their writing experience before Freshman Composition (Sandman and Weiser 18). Also, during the course, whenever my students hand in papers, they answer a specific set of questions (different for each assignment) where they try to explain the strengths and weaknesses of their papers, before I tell them what I think (Sommers 174.) By the time my students get to this self-evaluation exercise at the end of the course, they have had

considerable practice at evaluating their own writing; therefore I was expecting developed, detailed self-evaluations.

I was also expecting that my students would be more positive and confident towards writing at the end of the semester. I suppose I was indulging in what Stephen North describes as the television doctor view of teaching writing (46): I was hoping that students would claim that my course had been the miracle cure for their writing ailments .

One of my students helped to counter my simplistic view with this comment:

> One of my weaknesses is fragments, and I have changed, but the things I am so use to doing slip in now and then." - Kimblerly Melendez.

This student had been writing sentence fragments for more than ten years, and after a fourteen-week course she was now aware of her problem and she was working on it. However, it would be ridiculous for either of us to claim that she was now cured and would never write another sentence fragment.

Because my expectations were so high, I was extremely disappointed by the first self-evaluations I read. First, many student responses were maddeningly brief. After a whole semester of my comments in the margins asking for elaboration, some of the comments that students wrote at the end of the semester were less concrete than what they wrote at the beginning. Students knew that the self-evaluations would not be

graded, and, at first, I thought the problem was that I did not intimidate them enough. In subsequent semesters I told students that their self-evaluations would be the last thing I would read before assigning a final grade. Even when I threatened my students, I still got too many quick responses. My current theory is that self evaluation, even with practice, is simply more difficult than I thought it would be.

After reading many disappointing self-evaluations, I began to wonder about my expectations. Did I really want my students to be more confident about their writing at the end of the course? In *Rhetorical Traditions and The Teaching of Writing* Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch claim that students are often more frustrated toward the end of a writing course because they are starting to experiment with structures and stylistic possibilities that they don't yet fully control (151).

Another factor which adds to students' frustration toward the end of a writing course is that many teachers save the most difficult assignment for last. My course ends with a research paper and the challenge of this assignment is often reflected in students' exit essays:

> My weaknesses are less than what they used to be, but now I have new weaknesses. I used to have trouble starting the paper, but now I have trouble in the middle. I start the paper strong, but in the middle I can't figure how to put together my ideas with the ideas I've read about.

So I just throw together all the stuff I've read and then I dump my ideas at the end. I know that's not how it is supposed to be, but I'm having trouble figuring out how to put things together. -- Michelle Connelly

This might seem like a disappointing place to end with a student. But there is an achievement occurring here: this exit essay gave me an accurate assessment of this student's research paper which I had not read yet. The fact that this student was able to assess her own weaknesses so well left me believing that she would be able to work through these problems in the future.

Here's another student whose exit essay was less confident than her essay at the beginning of the course:

August:

My strengths as a writer I feel is my ability to put my true feelings into words and to describe in detail.

My weakness as a writer is definitely my spelling.

December:

My strengths are: I try to set high standards for myself when I write. To me, writing isn't just as assignment; it's chance for me to express my true self to others. It's a piece of art I take pride in (or it doesn't get handed in).

I try to feel what I write. I think for someone to write a good paper they <u>have</u> to care

and have a passion for what they're writing about. It doesn't really work for me any other way. I can't write what I can't feel.

My weaknesses: one bad thing about being so emotional about my writing is that it does tend to sound mellow dramatic. I have to learn to let my feelings go only so far. Another problem I've always had is spelling (Hey, it runs in the family).

One last thing I have a problem with is, believe it or not, I'm a perfectionist, and when I try to get a piece of writing perfect which is impossible, I end up becoming very frustrated and I become immune to the fact that my writing is good. I have bad way of thinking: it's either perfect or terrible.--Sherry Hall

I was pleased by this exit essay because it showed me a student who has learned that writing can have too much emotion and who is struggling with her own high standards. One of the things I have learned from these essays is that, at the end of my course , sure, I want students to be more confident, but I also want to see some awareness of how complex and difficult writing can be.

What can we reasonably expect at the end of Freshman Composition? I don't mean to say that we can expect very little, but, instead, I want to argue that our expectations are almost always too simplistic. As Russell A. Hunt says in the following quote, the most difficult and, perhaps, the most vital part of assessment is predicting

how our students will face future writing challenges:

> We should not expect, of course, that we can work miracles of change in a sixteen or even a thirty-two week period. What we should be striving toward is opening a door of understanding, even a crack, so the student will understand there is a door and that perhaps light shines through it occasionally. As with so many processes in education we are often not around long enough to see the student fling the door wide and walk through (95).

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